What Makes a Good School: Students Speak Up at Leadership Forum

Teens design their own ideal school environment.

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by Sara Armstrong

Chiquita Hall explains the importance of technology tools for students to the ISTE Leadership Symposium.

Credit: Craig Costello

"I've been a student for almost thirteen years, and never did anyone ask me how I wanted a school to be." -- *Chiquita Hall, ISTE Student Technology Leadership Symposium member*

What happens when 24 high school students are brought together to articulate their ideas for what makes a good school? What if the students have never met or worked together before? What if there's a high-stakes culmination to their work -- like presenting their ideas to education leaders from across the country?

The answers to all these questions (and more) were revealed when a special project sponsored by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) came to fruition at the National Education Computing Conference (NECC) in Chicago, Illinois, in June 2001.

Big Ideas

Five student groups shared their presentations with ISTE's Leadership Symposium, which is made up of more than 150 educators from across the country who strive to develop and model the effective use of technology in education in their schools, school districts, and states.

Although they worked independently, the students found common threads among their interests and concerns:

> The learning environment should be safe.
> Learning spaces should be open and airy.
> The curriculum should be comprehensive but student driven.
> Activities should be hands on and related to real-world work.
> An array of technology tools and access should be available at all times, from home and school.
> Varied learning styles should be honored.
> Emotional and intellectual support should be offered to students.

In this ideal school, all members of the community -- students, teachers, administrators, parents, school staff, and business and community members -- would participate in

developing and implementing studies. Flexible scheduling would be the norm. One group even recommended twenty-four-hour school for those who think more effectively at night. "Learning shouldn't be run by the clock," one group member reported.

Student Technology Leadership Symposium students collaborate with peers from other schools to develop their plans.

Credit: Craig Costello

A focus on collaboration and the benefits of lifelong learning would also be key. "We all need to learn from each other," Brian Mendez emphasized in his explanation of his group's ideas.

Members of the Leadership Symposium gave the students a standing ovation after seeing their PowerPoint presentations and participating in a short question-and-answer session. The audience was particularly moved by a number of comments the students made, including one's plea for a safe school. "My parents have raised me well," she said. "I know how important an education is, and I'm working on it. Just give me a safe place to go to learn."

"I was surprised to see the back seat technology took to relationships with teachers, a desire for self-determination, and responsibility for their own learning," said Holly Jobe, director of instructional-materials services for Pennsylvania's Montgomery County schools. "Most of the students want a flexible, democratic learning environment where they can prepare to be leaders in the world. They would like the focus to be on learning how to learn. They want to know how to relate acquired information to their lives, and to become lifelong learners, explorers, and discoverers."

Bernard Percy, editor in chief of *Converge* magazine, wrote of his experience at the symposium in the September 2001 issue of the publication's editor's note. "We were all moved and inspired by the clarity of their communication, the sincerity of their observations, and the passion of their vision," he recalled.

Brian Mendez makes a point about school safety to the Leadership Symposium audience.

Symposium Structure

Two groups of adults assisted the students during their planning day. Teacher members of the QUEST Project served as facilitators for the students. (The focus of QUEST, a partnership between Toyota Motor Manufacturing of Kentucky and the Scott County Schools, in Georgetown, Kentucky, is on integrating business and industry problem-solving strategies into education.) A group of "expert learners" shared their expertise and offered feedback on the student plans and how they might be presented to the Leadership Symposium the following day.

Students were divided into teams and set loose to begin brainstorming what they would do "if we could design a school." After dinner, the teams presented their ideas to each other and the adults to look for consensus on important items and issues, which would form a single presentation, or to determine whether the teams had enough diversity in their thinking to warrant several presentations.

The latter proved to be the case. Though some students and most adults went to bed after the long day's efforts, a number of students and a few adults stayed up most of the night shaping the presentations. On Sunday morning, students rehearsed their talks before joining members of ISTE's Leadership Symposium for lunch -- after which they were the featured speakers.

Students brainstorm and record their ideas before sharing them with their peers and Symposium "expert learners."

Honoring Student Contributions

Student Emily McCartan shared the thoughts of many of her peers when she said, "School must be a series of hands-on, personalized, engaging experiences that preserve student curiosity and joy of learning."

The ISTE Student Technology Leadership Symposium grew out of a commitment of the ISTE board to include students such as McCartan in discussions regarding the effective use of technology in education, education reform, and other such important topics. These efforts were championed by former board member Dennis Harper and current members such as Marilyn Piper, Sue Waalkes, Leslie Flanders, and Al Rogers.

The Student Technology Leadership Symposium, designed by an insightful planning committee made up of students and adults, traces its beginnings to work begun at the 1999 K12 Student Technology Leaders Committee. A next step was taken when a few students were included in events such as a student panel discussion at NECC 2000, as well as attendance at several

adult gatherings, including the NECC 2000 Leadership, Computer Science, and Minority Symposia.

The plan for the ISTE Student Technology Leadership Symposium was for high school students to have an opportunity to use their leadership and technology skills in educational change and to develop models for learning that involve youth and adults working together in full partnership.

Students were chosen to attend based on an application process (which included writing about why participating was important) and teacher recommendations. A group of 24 enthusiastic sophomores, juniors, seniors, and new high school graduates from Illinois, Kentucky, Texas, Washington, the Virgin Islands, and South Africa converged in Chicago. "Technology and education have slowly started to merge, bringing education to an entirely new level," said Student Dustin Lyons. "I want to be part of this unity."

Pooja Agarwal shares her group's interest in learning based on inquiry and hands-on exploration.

Credit: Craig Costello

Looking to the Future

For NECC 2002, students planned to present their work in a number of sessions open to all conference attendees. Although a Student Technology Leadership Symposium was not scheduled for that year, other means for stimulating discussion and affecting school reforms from the student viewpoint were planned. "If we want to make the world a better place, we have to get smarter and make our children smarter," said student Elias Morales.

As student Pooja Agarwal stated in her article, "If I Could Make a School," published in the November 2001 issue of ISTE's publication *Learning & Leading with Technology*, she was excited to find other students who shared her passion and interest in improving the quality of educational experiences. "Knowing there were others who shared the same views was comfort and encouragement in itself. . . . Teaming up with another student at the conference, we set out to make our dreams come true."

Agarwal and Matt Knisley were already working on creating a school that responds to the energy and enthusiasm of today's students. In his belief statement for the Symposium Web site, Knisley asked, "How can I help make teaching and learning noble again? How can I encourage teachers to use effective and dynamic teaching methods for all students? How do I respond to those who say there is no hope for schools?"

ISTE's Student Technology Leadership Symposium at NECC 2001.

The student voice remains powerful, though too rarely included in school design, curriculum structure, and other discussions. However, the Student Technology Leadership Symposium opened an important door into school reform -- an acknowledgment of the passion students have for effectively and well educating children. "Education cannot stay the same," said student Nicole Makula, "and today's youth are the ones to change it."

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This article originally published on 2/11/2002